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ABSTRACT

This booklet offers guidelines for theater directors, activities directors, club sponsors, and school administrators to ensure the production of "bias-sensitive" performances that avoid presentation of bias based on gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, age, disability, or sexual orientation. The booklet: (1) discusses the issue of bias-sensitive performances; (2) offers a definition of such a performance; (3) discusses the six common forms of insensitive biases; (4) offers performance guidelines; and (5) answers six frequently asked questions. (RS)

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A PRODUCTION GUIDE

Producing Bias-Sensitive Theatrical Performances and Variety Shows

A Primer for Producers of Plays, Talent and Variety Shows, Assembly Programs, and Other Similar Events

ED 371 418

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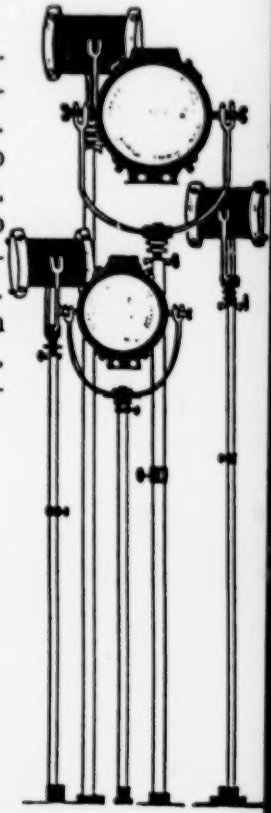
The Issue

Freedom of expression is important in the theatre and in the school community; however, educators have a responsibility to present to audiences and performers alike an arena that is entertaining, thought provoking, and welcoming to any portion of the audience. Theatre can entertain, inform, and instruct as well as change perceptions and biases.

A student performance is a meaningful event for performers, technicians, and audience alike. Performers have worked for many weeks to perfect lines, reactions, costumes, scenery, properties, lighting, and other aspects to create a polished and professional presentation in which they can take pride. Insensitive biases, however, can diminish this occasion and make many people, whether onstage, offstage, or in the audience, feel hurt, angry, and excluded.



The Definition

A bias-sensitive theatrical performance consciously avoids the presentation of the six common types of insensitive biases as listed on pages 4 and 5.

The Invitation

We invite **YOU** the:

- theater director
- activities director
- club sponsor
- school administrator, to:

Consider these guidelines to help ensure your school produces exciting, inclusive, and bias-sensitive performances.

Celebrate the performance efforts of all students regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, or physical challenge.

Share this brochure with other producers, students, and parents to heighten their awareness of and provide guidance for sensitive issues.

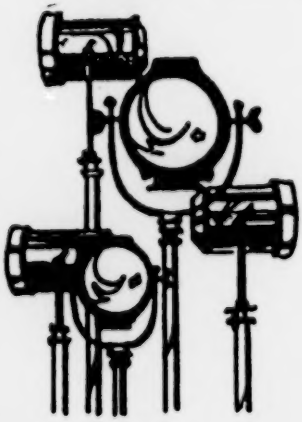
Common Forms of Insensitive Biases

Based on Gender, Race, Ethnicity, National Origin, Age, Disability, or Sexual Orientation That May Impact Theatrical Performances

- **OMISSION:**
  excluding or omitting persons of a certain group on a consistent basis. (e.g., no minority students cast in speaking roles; no females on the technical crew; no disabled cast or crew members).

- **STEREOTYPING:**
  attributing to all members of a group characteristics of some members of a group, thus denying individual interests or abilities. (e.g., "only girls can dance" or "most male actors and male musicians are gay").

- **FRAGMENTATION:**
  separation or segregation based on gender, race, ethnicity, or other characteristic (e.g., major roles are all played by Anglo students, minor roles by minority students).



➡ **DISTORTION:**
a myth or misconception portrayed as the historical or present truth
(e.g., "inner-city youths" are usually members of gangs [i.e. *West Side Story*]; Afro-Americans really enjoyed entertaining the white people during the slavery era [i.e. *Showboat*]).

➡ **LINGUISTIC BIAS:**
using male-dominated pronouns or terms, ethnic slurs, derogatory names. (e.g.,

Biased	Unbiased
Brotherhood of man	Human Family
theatre fag	theatre performer
broad or dame	woman
nigger, darkie	African American or Black
spic	Latino or Hispanic
hunks, studs	attractive males

➡ **UNREALITY:**
a major unrealistic situation or character is portrayed as authentic and credible. (i.e., ".....oh, I really don't mind it that Billy beats me.") *[Carousel]*

adapted from Shirley McCune, Council of Chief State School Officers 1978

The Performance Guidelines

➟ **SELECTION** The director/sponsor is ultimately responsible for the text and/or performance. If insensitive bias is an essential part of the context of the performance, then the director/sponsor should take steps to educate the performers and the audience alike as to the historical significance of the bias. A general rule for play selection is to look at the script/performance from the perspective of current cultural norms and sensitivities.

➟ **AUDIENCE ANALYSIS** Audiences bring diverse perspectives; communities do not exist in isolation. The director/sponsor will want to view the performance process from many perspectives, while maintaining artistic and educational integrity.

➟ **INTERPRETATION** The director/sponsor and performers make artistic choices concerning such things as blocking, costuming, particular words, vocal and physical expression that have the potential to create or remove harmful biases.

➟ **CASTING** "Non-traditional casting" stretches and educates the performers and the audience alike, but directors/sponsors should exercise caution so that casting does not perpetuate insensitive biases or insensitive stereotypes. (For example: multi-racial love interests, representation of one culture by use of another type-cast culture, a noticeable/visible appearance miscast to make a point, making "social statements" through unusual casting.)

➡ **CONTRACTS** A contract in which participants agree to high performance standards may be entered into to guarantee consistency from audition to rehearsal to performance.

➡ **EDUCATION** Since schools are the propagators of the democratic ideals and social norms, Directors/ Sponsors/ Performers, should research and analyze biases that may exist in the text/performance. Then aesthetic choices they make are more likely to have a bias-sensitive perspective.

➡ **FOLLOW-UP** A discussion involving the director/sponsor, the performers, and the audience following a performance may be helpful to defuse emotions, to define goals, and to clarify perspectives.

➡ **USE OF CONSULTANTS** Community experts and other knowledgeable people may be called upon early in the production processes to consult with the performers and/or to participate in the after-performance discussion. These resource people should understand the importance of creating a performance free of insensitive biases.

➡ **PRINTED PROGRAMS** The printed program serves as a valuable tool to educate the audience. It illustrates the performance goals and the benefits of participation in the performance process. Use the program to describe or set the tone for any unique or unusual circumstances in the production.

➡ **SPECIAL NEEDS POPULATIONS** Persons who use wheel-chairs or other adaptive devices require safe access to parking, seating, the stage, and back-stage areas. In addition, consider a trained signer who can interpret the performance for those who are hearing impaired or programs in Braille for those who are vision impaired.

Frequently Asked Questions

➧ ***WHAT IS AN INSENSITIVE BIAS?***

Insensitive bias is a one-sided, non-objective point of view about a complex situation/ issue stemming from an unreasonable distortion of judgement or lack of knowledge which creates or continues an inaccurate perspective of that situation causing hurt, anger, frustration, and exclusion.

➧ ***THIS DOCUMENT SOUNDS LIKE FORCED POLITICAL CORRECTNESS. WHERE IS FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION?***

This guideline does not represent forced political correctness, but rather fosters sensitivity to all members of the school community, their parents, and the community at large. Instead of perpetuating insensitive biases, theatre can promote tolerance and understanding and respect.

➧ ***WHO NEEDS THIS GUIDELINE?***

Theatre is a recognized powerful means of education and social progress. Because of the imitative nature of theatre, the audience tends to believe as real and credible what they see in the behavior of the characters. The audience reaches agreement, or disagreement because of the immediacy of the live performance. Producing a theatrical performance or variety show carries the responsibility of being honest and truthful while presenting points of view that are also age appropriate. There is no substitute for good judgement. Biases of a historical nature can be used to advantage in a teaching situation. For example:

Fiddler On The Roof — religious persecution through a pogrom against Jews.
Show Boat — the perspective of slavery and inter-racial marriage.
Taming of The Shrew — violence against women.

➔ ***DOES THIS GUIDELINE PROMOTE CENSORSHIP OR COPYRIGHT VIOLATION?***

No. The purpose of the guideline is to increase awareness to issues that directors, performers, and audiences may have otherwise not considered. Altering the text of a copyrighted work without the expressed permission of the copyright holder is a violation of law. However, nuances of performance are within the performer's interpretive art and are not subject to the law and may be manipulated to produce a bias-sensitive performance.

➔ ***HOW CAN WE ACCOMMODATE THE THEATRICAL TRADITIONS OF BURLESQUE, PARODY, AND FARCE WITHIN THESE GUIDELINES?***

Theatrical traditions of burlesque, parody, farce and other comic modes should be celebrated. The character types and situations should be performed broadly enough to encompass a full range of human behavior (such as greed, sloth, or lasciviousness) while giving careful consideration to not assigning those qualities to a particular race, gender, or group. Age appropriateness of the audience should also be a consideration. Production meetings, program notes, and post-performance discussions would be helpful making these performances fun, educational, and socially responsible, bias sensitive, and gender fair.

Questions, Cont.

➔ *DON'T THESE GUIDELINES CREATE MORE WORK FOR DIRECTOR/ SPONSORS WHO ARE ALREADY OVERWORKED?*

The guidelines are intended to be infused into the existing production process for more critical thinking about the show. This brochure can help sponsors/directors in preparing themselves, their performers, and their audiences for the presentation. The results of following the suggestions in this Guide —the positive relations that the school develops with the community — are well worth the effort. And anything less short-changes both the students and the community. The sponsor/director, who is helping to organize a group of people to communicate an artistic thought should be sensitive to harmful biases in order to educate performers and responsibly entertain audiences.

You are encouraged to use local minority (ethnic, religious, gender, etc.) resources to assist in the selection or production of performances that may contain sensitive areas or thematics.

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